PAUL BLOOMFIELD

A Note On Malthus*

UNLESS MY EARS deceived me, Mary Stocks in her most interesting 1959 Galton Lecture said of Malthus: "He wanted the poor to starve." Perhaps my ears did deceive me, because in the reprint of the Lecture in this REVIEW (**51**, 11) I can only find: "... he wanted the poor law abolished altogether." He wanted, as a matter of fact, something even more unthinkable.

The population problem, to which Malthus had begun drawing attention in 1798 in the first edition of his famous essay, did not much disturb Government or the educated public till after Waterloo, seventeen years later. By then the failure of the Speenhamland system of poor relief was becoming increasingly apparent, though that system was hardly as economically profane as it has been represented; the incentive it offered to the poor to have large families was not glittering. The children, quite simply, were born, and more and more of them were surviving infancy. By the early 'twenties James Mill cautiously, and the amazing breeches-maker of Charing Cross, Francis Place, boldly, were advocating contraceptive methods for "the people". They had not the slightest chance of success. An alternative relief for over-population, sending men and women to the colonies, seemed hardly less unpalatable to the Tory ministers, to the exiguous Colonial Office staff or to Cobbett, the most vigorous radical propagandist of the day. (Whigs as well as Tories then and later were haunted by the loss of America.) And yet something had to be tried. In 1826, therefore, a Select Committee was appointed to discuss the possibilities of emigration. The Colonial Under-Secretary, Wilmot-Horton, presided.

The most impressive witness called to give evidence before this Committee was Malthus himself. He was at the time sixty years old. Though this quiet, truth-loving person had been, as John Stuart Mill had said, for the last twenty-five years "the best-abused man of his age", later ages have not been content to let that record stand: he has been one of the best-abused men ever since, and of course not in England only. When Shelley had declared in his Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, a poem chiefly written among "flowery glades and thickets of odoriferous blossoming trees", that he would rather go to hell with Plato and Bacon than to heaven with Paley and Malthus, Malthus had already for many years been teaching history and cogitating in the less idyllic environment of Haileybury College. The great reproach used against him, by those who did reproach him—and that meant almost everybody except John Stuart Mill, some of the younger generation of Benthamites and Sydney Smith—was that his "principle" was a piece of class Jesuitry aimed at the liberties, such as they were, of the labourers, the poor, the paupers. A good many people everywhere at last realize that even if the relation between numbers and resources is not regular in the way Malthus made out, he was not saying too much, and that, on the contrary, the need for birth control has become more urgent since modern medicine has achieved such wonders of *death* control. It is one of the Malthusian ironies of the present century that during the sixty years which have included the two world wars world population has doubled.

The ideal check on population increase, Malthus said, was "moral" restraint. Husbands were not to sleep with their wives! But the result of the lack of restraint that he deplored was not just more people, but more *paupers*. It was at this point that the kindly, worried Malthus seemed to show the cloven hoof, for obviously it was not the rich who usually created paupers when they had large families. The Whig chief, Lord Grey, for instance, with his eight sons and two

* With the permission of my publishers, Longmans, I am including in this note some passages from my forthcoming life of Edward Gibbon Wakefield.—P. B.

daughters, was getting on very well without assistance out of the rates. If there was going to be legislative action, it was with the *paupers'* connubial affairs that society would interfere—to stop them begetting more paupers. In fact in the last year of Malthus's life, 1834, Chadwick's Poor Law Amendment Act segregated husbands and wives in the institutions for paupers and set the seal on the unpopularity of "Malthusianism".

All the leading Whigs were for a time tarred with the same brush. On one occasion O'Connor, the Chartist orator, delighted his audience with a picture of Lord Brougham and his wife being sent to a workhouse of which he was overseer. "I shall be sorry for Lady Brougham. I know no harm of her. But I would have no pity for him. 'No, no, Harry' I will say to him, 'you may not go with my lady; this is the way for you; otherwise you might breed.' " But resentment against the Act of 1834 did something else —made it for a long time a tradition with the English left wing to confuse the harsh statute with the harsh natural principle, and, by condemning the one, they seemed to be exposing the falseness of the other. This in spite of the fact that the radical Francis Place a rationalist with compassion for human "weakness", was one of the pioneers of "Neo-Malthusianism". As I said above, he made propaganda for artificial methods of birth-control which it remained impossible to discuss openly in polite society for another hundred years.

The condom, commonly known as the French Letter, often made of goldbeater's skin, had been in use since the seventeenth century, if not before. Carr-Saunders believes that Place may have been the author of the "diabolical handbills" circulating in the 'twenties; these leaflets were meant to instruct the poor how to limit their families, and whether Place had written them himself or not "he was prepared to sacrifice much popularity" in this cause. It was not indeed a *hopeless* cause, but the difficulties can be imagined if one considers that in despite of the sex-sophistication we have to-day, and the clinics, and the informative books and the talk that goes on, there are believed to be at least a hundred and fifty thousand illegal abortions a year in this country.

After all, there is no disguising that it *was* a "shovelling out of paupers" that was being meditated. Malthus, to do him justice again, was trying to formulate that concept of optimum numbers which is the beginning of demographic wisdom. Suppose resources to be unlimited: it does not follow that the ideal size of population would be unlimited also. If the poor people confined in the Black Hole of Calcutta, a hundred and forty-six of them in a space of twenty feet square, had had as much roast chicken and champagne as they wanted, and arrangements had been made to air-condition their living room, they would still have lacked something—namely freedom consistent with the requirements of the spirit as well as of the body and its members. A high material standard of life is not by itself a guarantee of social health.

In their report, Wilmot-Horton's Committee recommended a scheme of emigration as a relief for "redundant" able-bodied paupers. This was to be an alternative to the heavy poor-rates. According to Malthus the present arrangement was most uneconomic and, economically speaking, of course he was right. But he did *not* want the poor to starve: giving evidence before the Committee he spoke with strong disapproval of looking on the unemployed as a convenient labour reserve, an attitude that many people complacently took for such a long time to come.

Neither he nor Wilmot-Horton was exactly proposing to "shovel out" the paupers against their will. They were to go voluntarily. But suppose they preferred to stay at home? There was the rub. Malthus's opinion was that if they were offered a chance of emigrating and refused to go, their claim to relief in the parish would be even less valid than he considered it was under actual circumstances. . . . One gets a vivid impression of the conflict that was agitating his methodical soul, the conflict between a good heart and a mind groping for the irrefragable economic principles on which the poor laws should be reformed, if necessary (for the good of the greatest number?) with a new bureaucratic ruthlessness. The kindness in him had flashed out in his answers to questions relating to the poor in Ireland. For instance he was asked: "What circumstances in your opinion contribute to produce a taste for com-

fort and cleanliness among a people?" He answered: "Civil and political liberty and education." The half-truth in a nutshell.

Then if there was to be this scheme of emigration, who was to say which paupers *were* redundant? And how was it to be financed?

The paupers' fate was to be decided by "the district, parish or individual who may consider such emigrants redundant, either as tenantry or as labourers". To speak of "such emigrants" in that context was begging the question, however. If anything significant had come of all this there can be little doubt that the scheme would have been abused. Would it have been easy to stop a harsh magistrate, a callous landlord, a Scrooge of the counting house, from presenting any poor devil he had a grudge against with a ticket—but not a return ticket—for the antipodes? As to the question, what the financial arrangements were to be, the answer was that the districts, parishes and individuals that earmarked the redundant paupers for—let us call it by its right name—deportation, were to find the money. They were to pay with lump sums, loans to the "emigrants", from whom they were to get their money back when these had made good.

Asked what he thought, Malthus had said: "If it can be shown that the expense of removing such labourers by emigration is less than that of maintaining them at home, no doubt can exist of the expediency of so removing them"—and one is glad to know that he added: "and this independent of any question of repayment."

In the upshot, the Wilmot-Horton Committee's Report had little effect. Two streams of emigration nevertheless began flowing in the 'thirties. The one was directed to North America, especially to the United States, and was practically spontaneous, though in 1840 Russell set up a Board to try to regulate it. The other and lesser movement was extremely important for the British Empire and Commonwealth; it had been carefully organised by a young man who, while the Wilmot-Horton Committee was sitting, had got himself gaoled for abducting a girl heiress. Largely owing to him, Edward Gibbon Wakefield, Canada was kept loyal to the Crown, and Australia and New Zealand were opened up for systematic colonization by the British people. The Wakefield system would have satisfied Malthus because the aid given under it to working-class emigrants was "independent of any question of repayment."

If Mrs. Stocks did not say that Malthus wanted the poor to starve there have been plenty of others to make the indictment. But the true charge against him is that he, who in the teeth of hatred and vilification stood so bravely by his "principle" (which was one day to inspire *Darwin's* principle of "natural selection"), should have been ingenuous enough to believe in "moral restraint" as the poor man's contraceptive.

We are often in a quandary more serious than most of us realize when we try to evaluate the greatness or the goodness of eminent men. How, for instance, do we balance Malthus's wisdom against his naïveté?

When in the early sixteenth century the good Las Casas, Bishop of Mexico, found that the Spaniards' Indian slaves were constitutionally unfit for working in the mines, he recommended that they should be replaced by Africans, who were hardier. His intentions were entirely merciful. Though he lived to be sorry for what he had proposed we might feel he should have come out against slavery at the start. But the trouble, of course, was a "principle". The principle of slavery seemed to him to be in nature —not to mention that like some other Spaniards he had sincerely believed that enslaving the Indians was the first step towards christianizing them. So Malthus believed that unsexing the paupers was a first step towards assuring them not indeed of life everlasting but of a living wage.

Or take the case of the kindly Darwin. He too was obsessed by a principle—his own, inspired by Malthus. In 1881 he wrote in a letter: ". . . I could show fight on natural selection having done and doing more for the progress of civilization than you seem inclined to admit. . . . Looking to the world at no very distant date, what an endless number of the lower races will have been eliminated by the higher civilized races throughout the world." Nobody could suspect that Darwin wanted the elimination of a single man or woman —any more than Malthus wished a single pauper to starve. Unfortunately these good men, like Las Casas lovers of humanity, believed in the

force majeure of supposed natural laws without sufficiently taking either human psychology or human ingenuity into account—an error into which Darwin's cousin Galton did not fall.

That Darwin was a "good" man is sufficiently clear from his own and his biographers' evidence. Less is known about Malthus, though copies of Bonar's *Life*, first published in 1885 and last reprinted nearly forty years ago, are not hard to lay hands on; but one may doubt whether it is often read.

What was he "like"? An intelligent old lady, Mrs. Herbert Martin of Hampstead, described him in her memoirs as "a polite, handsome, kind old man, tall and slender, with dark eyes". The attractive portrait by John Linnell shows him a benign and scholarly figure, "erect and cheerful" says Bonar. One cannot notice from it that he had the hare lip to which the defect in his speech was due. He was married and had three children, and his domestic life seems to have been happy. He was not ambitious—"there is no sign that he desired more money or wanted to be more in the sun". More money, that is to say, than he had inherited, together with his salary as Professor of History and Political Economy at Haileybury. As for being more "in the sun"—surely he had enough of being so much in the limelight!

One is grateful to him for giving the Reverend Sydney Smith, that nonpareil among English wits and parsons, a chance of alluding to him in a letter. Writing from Combe Florey in Somerset to Lady Holland in July 1831 Smith says: "Philosopher Malthus came here last week. I got an agreeable party for him of unmarried people. There was only one lady who had had a child; but he is a good-natured man, and, if there are no appearances of approaching fertility, is civil to every lady, Malthus is a real moral philosopher, and I could almost consent to speak as inarticulately, if I could think and act as wisely."

When Malthus died, an aunt of Mrs. Herbert Martin's wrote to a friend: "I want to talk to you of the good man who is gone . . . No one who knew him could help loving him"; and to another friend: "We have just lost a man of whom it might be said that no one was more beloved and no one more abused. . . . His temper was proof against all the ill-treatment he met with, whether in print or in *viva voce* debate amongst his brother political economists; his conversation was particularly elegant, classical and engaging. His friends justly, I think, upbraid the pusillanimity of the late ministry in omitting to confer some mark of their esteem on a man they so loudly extolled, and by many of whose ideas they had profited, but whose name had the vulgar cry against it."